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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 251632Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7011
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS TUNIS 000869

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TUNISIAN MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION RECEPTIVE TO
THEMES IN THE SECRETARY'S MARRAKESH SPEECH

REF: TUNIS 860

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Dr. Lazhar Bououni, the Tunisian Minister of Higher Education, voiced his support for many of the themes in the Secretary's Marrakesh speech (including the visit of a Presidential Science Envoy) when he met with the Ambassador on November 25. In addition to science and technology, the Minister stressed that English-language instruction in Tunisia was sorely in need of expansion, and was receptive to the possibility of resuming a Peace Corps program in Tunisia.

¶2. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's request for swift and positive action on the research topics of four Fulbright doctoral students, the Minister was positive and said he would have an answer within a few days. He also expressed willingness to reconsider the general deadlines for submitting doctoral dissertation topics for review. The Minister and the Ambassador also discussed the 2004 Agreement on Science and Technology Cooperation, new areas of emphasis in Tunisia's higher education plan, areas for possible cooperation between the two countries, and the problem of impeded Embassy access to campuses. End summary.

The Secretary's Marrakesh Speech

¶3. (SBU) In the course of the conversation, the Minister of Higher Education voiced his support for many of the themes the Secretary sounded in her November 3 speech in Marrakesh. He particularly emphasized the importance of English-language instruction and science and technology. When the Ambassador noted plans to send a Presidential Science Envoy, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, to Tunisia in the next few months, the Minister replied that he had met him before, that he was held in high respect in Tunisia, and that he was looking forward to conferring with him.

Importance of English Language Instruction

¶4. (SBU) Bououni mentioned that English-language instruction was receiving enormous emphasis and that a requirement of five semesters of English over a period of three years has been made a requirement for a degree in all disciplines, at all universities. He hoped that the details for cooperation in this area could be worked out in further meetings between our "teams." The Ambassador asked about the possibility of re-introducing the Peace Corps, which had done

much English teaching in Tunisia, and the Minister said that he would reflect on the idea after discussing it with his staff. If the Peace Corps were to return, he said he would want them to teach English for special purposes, keyed to particular fields, again saying that this was something that "our teams" could work out. The Minister parenthetically remarked that the three "Language Village" programs that AMIDEAST has been conducting with financial support from the Embassy and expertise from the Regional English Language Officer in Rabat was a huge success and that he welcomed this sort of immersion language program.

Fulbright Program

¶15. (SBU) The Ambassador explained that we have been having difficulties administering the Fulbright program, and presented the Minister with a list of the four Fulbrighters currently in country whose research plans are on hold. The Minister said he would "have an answer for us about their status in two or three days." (Comment: We will follow up on November 30, after the conclusion of the Eid Al-Adha holiday. End comment.)

¶16. (SBU) The Ambassador also raised the problem of unrealistic deadlines set by the Ministry for approving Fulbright dissertation topics and asked that the deadline be re-set to November 30. Although the Minister expressed willingness to reconsider these details, he indicated that this matter was tied more to the calendar of the universities that host the doctoral candidates than to any instructions on the part of the Ministry. He indicated that this issue could be reviewed in upcoming discussions, however, but was

confident that some adjustment might be reached. (See reftel for more details about the deadline problem.)

¶17. (SBU) The Minister remarked that currently, academic exchanges are mainly limited to the Fulbright program but that he would like to see an expansion of exchanges with more students involved (he mentioned at the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D candidate levels) and the opportunity to study in each other's country. He also mentioned that Tunisia was reaching out to other countries for educational expertise, naming Canada, Japan, China and South Korea. He saw a "very, very urgent need" for other countries to play a role in Tunisia's educational development plans. Among these was a desire to expand the number of Tunisian engineers from about 4,500 today to 9,000 by 2014.

¶18. (SBU) Bououni expounded on the power of educational exchanges to build closer interpersonal understanding between the populations of different countries and said that this was particularly important in the post-9/11 world to reduce the possibility of a "clash of civilizations." "We are both peace-loving countries," he continued and, "our intelligentsias need to build more bridges." "Americans should come to Tunis to do research and learn Arabic; Tunisians need to live in America and earn diplomas."

Overview of Higher Education in Tunisia

¶19. (SBU) Dr. Bououni referred to a major educational initiative in progress, saying that the United States and Tunisia have cooperated a great deal in education, but that they could do more. He mentioned that the current tempo of American academic interactions was insufficient to address adequately the big plans that Tunis had for the next five years. Among these was the opening of "techno-parks" or regional research and training centers focusing on such areas as computer science, information technology, alternative energy, environment issues, and bio-tech. The Minister said that Tunisia was remarkably well-developed from the point of view of higher education, citing 370,000 students in universities country-wide, at 13 universities (including one

distance-learning based virtual university) and 32 research centers, some of which were well-known abroad. The new "techno-parks" were an addition to this slate and the Minister mentioned that he would be eager to see what America could do to help.

U.S.-Tunisian Science and Technology Agreement

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that there was already an agreement between the countries on scientific cooperation signed in 2004 that had never been ratified by Tunisia. He stressed that rather than negotiate a new agreement, the existing one should serve as a basis for further discussion, adding that a senior American delegation on science and technology was prepared to come to Tunisia in the next few months. He also noted the possibility of adding additional items of cooperation as an annex. The Minister said that adjustments to the existing agreement were possible and that he would welcome such a delegation. After the meeting concluded, the Minister's chief of staff asked the Ambassador when the U.S. delegation could visit Tunisia; the Ambassador replied that he understood that a visit in the first quarter of 2010 was under consideration but it would be helpful to know early which dates worked for the Ministry.

Access Issues

¶11. (SBU) The Ambassador explained that while the United States definitely is eager to cooperate, the current problems Embassy officers have in obtaining timely permission to visit campuses (i.e., submission of a diplomatic note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for every appointment) works against their being able to cooperate to the degree necessary to implement the terms of any agreement. The Minister said he understood the point and that he would try to do something to resolve the problem. The Ambassador also raised the problem of limited access to the Ministry's Agency for the Promotion of Research and Innovation, which is partnering with the Commercial Law Development Program at the Department of Commerce on a technical assistance program.

GRAY